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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000832

SIPDIS

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TAGS: IZ PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: LEAVING FALLUJAH -- AND ANBAR: "TIME TO TEST OURSELVES" IN IRAQ'S SO-CALLED HOT SPOT

REF: A. BAGHDAD 0515

1B. BAGHDAD 0763

Classified By: PMIN Robert S. Ford, reasons 1.4 b/d.

1. (C) SUMMARY: The last Marine departed the symbolic city of Fallujah -- twice the scene in 2004 of the Iraq war's most intense fighting -- on March 3, 2009. In a series of recent discussions, a diverse cross-section of Fallujah residents (a shopkeeper, an Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) official, two lawyers, an ex-highway patrol officer, and several Fallujah City Council members and mayor) told Embassy Poloff that U.S. troops should begin to leave the rest of Anbar Province, starting now. A city shopkeeper summarized much of the local sentiment by telling us it was "time to test ourselves" in Fallujah and in Anbar. The only notable exception to this consensus came from Sahwa or "Awakening" group members, who have developed close ties with the Marines. Several longstanding Fallujah contacts urged that a Marine drawdown commence, with an eye toward getting to a smaller overall U.S. troop presence soon, but possibly leaving a much-reduced longer-term presence. Notably, some said the U.S. should consider establishing a base in western Iraq to last beyond the Security Agreement's (SA) 2011 departure deadline. How quickly and in what form troop departures should take place elicited more varied responses. None characterized Anbar as a security "hot spot" -- PM Maliki's private description to us of Iraq's vast western province. END SUMMARY.

FALLUJAH: MARINES LEAVE SYMBOLIC
"CITY OF MOSQUES" -- FOR GOOD

12. (U) The Marines have left Fallujah. The last one, squad leader SSGT Mark P. Mangio, part of a 41-man unit based in the city, departed on March 3, 2009. The departure of Marines from the notorious war-torn "city of mosques" marks an important symbolic transition where the most intense (and high-cost) fighting of the Iraq war since the 2003 invasion took place. In 2004, Fallujah stood as al-Qaeda mastermind Zarqawi's adopted home town in Iraq. The biggest indicator of Fallujah's improved security became evident during the recent PC election day, January 31, 2009, when Poloff and two Turkish poll observers visited four election sites without immediate Marine protection. At each location, children were present -- protected by plentiful and un-masked local police. (NOTE: In prior years, most ISF serving in Fallujah wore masks to hide their identities. END NOTE). An IP major, and a longtime Poloff contact, proudly remarked on election day, "look, no masks and no body armor" at a polling site in

central Fallujah.

¶ 13. (SBU) A single battalion of Marines will soon be responsible for the entire Fallujah area (in November 2004, over 10,000 U.S. military personnel assembled to attack and clear the city). They are stationed at a base, Camp Baharia, on the outskirts of the city. (NOTE: associated civilian and third-country national (TCN) contractors comprise approximately one out of three of the total personnel at the site, with many appearing to Poloff on a recent visit to be underutilized, e.g., TCNs being directed by KBR employees to sweep dirt out of gutters in a region notorious for its frequent spring-time sandstorms. END NOTE.) Qfrequent spring-time sandstorms. END NOTE.)

ANBAR: A "HOT SPOT" IN IRAQ?

¶ 14. (C) PM Maliki has told us privately that he considers Anbar Province to be a "hot spot" requiring a continued U.S. troop presence (reftel A). Due to Anbar's dramatically lower attack levels compared to previous years, however, MNF-I does not rank the province as a "hot spot" in military terms. Politically, Anbar remains in flux, specifically regarding Sahwa positioning -- alongside IIP weakness -- post-PC election (reftel B). Fallujah's main IIP official, Abu Mujahid, highlighted his party's ongoing doubts about the PM's willingness to reach out to Anbar's almost totally Sunni population. "Maliki is getting stronger and stronger, 2009 will be a year of many important decisions; we'll watch

BAGHDAD 00000832 002 OF 003

closely."

FALLUJANS: GO SMALLER, AND FASTER
SO TROOPS CAN STAY (A BIT) LONGER

¶ 15. (SBU) During a visit to Fallujah the week of March 9, Embassy Poloff gauged public attitudes toward the presence of U.S. forces in Anbar Province. Several Fallujah contacts told us that President Obama's February 27, 2009, speech announcing the planned troop drawdown in Iraq had led to rumors that the U.S. would leave, but not before "cutting a deal" with Iran that would harm Sunni interests in Iraq and the region. In several conversations (over tea, lunch and dinner), certain comments stood out, and include the following:

¶ 16. (SBU) THE CONSENSUS VIEW

--SHOPKEEPER: "It is time to test ourselves." "Anbar cannot rely on American troops for its security."

--IIP OFFICIAL: "We want to see more Americans in civilian dress, not in uniforms." "Fallujans no longer fear an American occupation of Iraq." "Once we see your troops start to leave, we will know this is true and then we might ask you to stay longer, but not yet."

--LAWYERS: "Maliki is strong and fair, but still weak when it comes to Iran." "The U.S. never followed its responsibilities as an Occupying Power in Iraq and now your country wants to leave when you want to leave. We will be ready because we have to be, but are Americans proud of the kind of Iraq you will leave behind?"

--EX-HIGHWAY PATROL OFFICER: "Marines have paid a high price in Anbar, and it is time for them to leave. Bases might be necessary in the future, but we will have to see who is in our next government. We think Maliki will be stronger."

"You Americans finally seemed to understand what caused the insurgency (in Anbar): the lack of education, use of religion by extremists to poison the people's thoughts, and money paid to young men to assassinate local leaders, no more than 50 dollars in some cases. Once you invaded, such problems were guaranteed to happen and increased after you repeated many mistakes." "Once you leave, it will be very hard to come back."

--FALLUJAH CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS AND MAYOR: "We know the U.S. will leave, but Iran and Syria remain our dangerous neighbors." "Talk of U.S. and Iranian 'negotiations' make us worried about the future. We do not fear the Iranian Army, just its intelligence service." "We must continue to clean Anbar of extremists from the inside. Only we can." "Americans destroyed everything in Iraq, not just one regime; you then brought in a government from outside and who have spent more time in foreign hotels than in Iraq."

¶7. (SBU) THE EXCEPTION

--SAHWA SHEIKHS: A half dozen Fallujah-area sheikhs (most formally tied to the Awakening movement) told Poloff that the departure of U.S. troops from Anbar would risk undermining security gains. They were the most vocal in their doubts about the current government's ability to build a non-sectarian Iraqi security force for the country. Key comments:

"You Americans fired our army, so you need to help rebuild it over the next ten years."

"Talk of U.S. troop departures bothers us -- if you leave, who will stop Iran?"

"Iran is on the rise, and we do not see the U.S. being as Q"Iran is on the rise, and we do not see the U.S. being as hard against them as you should be."

"Maliki was better this year than last year. We will see

BAGHDAD 00000832 003 OF 003

about next year."

"We want to see our country welcome U.S. troops like Japan and Korea have over many years."

NOTE: It is unsurprising that Anbar's tribal sheikhs would be the most vocal advocates for a continued U.S. troop presence. They have developed close ties with Marine units since the Awakening movement took hold. Their comments, however, need to be viewed in the light of the large amount of CERP (Commanders' Emergency Response Program) funds dedicated to the "Sons of Iraq" (SOI) program. Marines continue to fund SOI payments despite past GoI promises to cover these costs and move SOI into ISF or other formalized, GoI-paid positions. END NOTE.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Ironically, Anbar -- once Iraq's leading insurgent and extremist hotbed with repeated attacks directed at American forces -- has become one of Iraq's quietest regions. The extent to which we manage a steady, or more rapid, withdrawal of our forces there (especially Marines, who are considered by many Anbaris to be the province's strongest tribe in their own right) will be an early, and complicated, test case of the Security Agreement. While Fallujah-area tribes profess the need for Marines to stay, their greatest fear seems to be the loss of access to our funds via SOI payments and CERP projects. If the central government is

able to replace this money, especially the payments to SOI,
our hard-won security gains in Anbar will be less likely to
be followed by renewed violence.

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